

# Notes on Late Twentieth Century American History and Culture

## I. Watershed of World War II

- once again, America intervenes on a large scale in global affairs, first through economic aid to the allied powers battling European fascism
- after Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, direct military action against Germany, Italy and Japan, in alliance with Britain, France, and USSR
- war effort takes millions of Americans overseas, mobilizes civilian population; economic growth fueled by war production finally gets America out of the Great Depression
- war sees unprecedented human carnage; the rationalized destruction of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust and the unimaginable power of the atomic weapons that end the Asian war will cast a long shadow over the postwar consciousness

## II. From Hot to Cold War

- America emerges as undisputed superpower, militarily and economically
- while other nations are physically and economically devastated, continental US is unscathed; while the economies of Europe lie in ruins, American economy is the most powerful the world has ever seen
- but the end of war offers a paradox for Americans. On the one hand, the nation glories in its superpower status. *Time* magazine publisher Henry Luce declares this “the America century.”; widespread celebration of America as the greatest and freest nation the world has ever known, with a responsibility to spread that freedom around the globe.
- on the other hand, victory over fascism does not bring a sense of stability. US soon finds itself involved in a “Cold War” which will be fought out in both the countries of Europe (Germany, Greece, Yugoslavia) and in the decolonizing territories of the so-called Third World (Korea, Cuba, Vietnam) and which seems to promise no resolution except the unimaginable specter of nuclear holocaust; upshot is a permanent military economy (US will maintain a large standing army and spend untold billions on defense), and a more or less consistent feeling of insecurity and anxiety
- domestic repression of Communists, former communists and other left wing types: McCarthyism
- many American intellectuals will be especially sensitive to the specter of the atomic bomb and the contradictions of American imperialism

Tempting to see the extension of the venerable concept of the American frontier resurfacing in two arenas of postwar American life. First, in the imperial adventuring of American foreign policy: in the “cowboy” interventions of Cuba’s Bay of Pigs or the debacle of Vietnam, widely

acknowledged as the first war America had ever lost. Second in the self-consciously titled “New Frontier” of the American Space Program, a key component of America’s rivalry with the Soviet Union.

### **III. Economics and Technology**

The Consumer Economy that has been developing in American since the late nineteenth century continues to grow during this period. Impressive postwar prosperity. Unionized blue collar workers earn comparatively high wages, join the middle class. Economic system known as Fordism seeks to ensure stability of corporate capitalism by making consumers of factory workers. Postwar sees a flurry of spending on new homes (located in the suburbs of cities rather than their inner core), cars and appliances (including television, which becomes ubiquitous cultural influence). New deal reforms seek to bring stability to American economy and to provide a “safety net” for Americans against financial ruin, but problem of intransigent poverty, especially among racial minorities, who mostly now inhabit American inner cities, persists.

With the exception of an occasional temporary downturn, American economy continues to grow during this era. Major turning point comes with the world energy crisis of the 1970s, which, coupled with an increased awareness of the fragility of the environment, suggests limits to such consistent expansion. This economic crisis will prove one key factor in the rise to power of Ronald Reagan, elected president in 1980, who will challenge the New Deal consensus in the name of economic deregulation and a return to laissez faire practices. Years since have seen a profound restructuring of the American economy. Globalization has driven American manufacturing jobs and the high wages they offered overseas. Union power has been gutted. American economic welfare depends increasingly on the fortunes of deregulated banks and other huge financial institutions. Gap between rich and poor has widened significantly.

Continuing developments in science and technology, many having their origins in military projects.

- Mentioned the atomic bomb and television

- Continuing revolution in communications----satellites enable the rapid transmission of images and information around the world.

- development of semi-conductor and microchip technology fuels the evolution of computers which are ever more powerful and compact.

- by the end of the century, we are looking at technological developments that have revolutionized the practices of authorship (from typewriter to word processor, letter to email), and ultimately challenged the very idea of the book itself as a physical object

#### **IV. The Postwar Social Revolution**

Crucial Series of Racial, Ethnic and Gender oriented liberation movements  
-beginning in the mid-1950s, the Civil Rights movement will overturn the legally sanctioned system of apartheid (racial separation) in America; movement will progress from demands for basic civil rights to economic and cultural considerations (differing approaches of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X)

-this movement will in turn inspire a number of ethnic identity movements that gain momentum in the late 1960s (Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans) that will challenge the ideology of the melting pot

-Second Wave feminism revolutionizes gender relations

1963: Betty Friedan publishes *The Feminine Mystique*, identifying the stultified dissatisfaction of well-educated, "happily married" American women as "the problem with no name"

Friedan will argue that American women are bored, morbidly introspective, over-tranquilized and psychoanalyzed, and need to find meaningful employment outside the home in order to find fulfillment

Friedan's message will resonate with a new generation of women, coming of age in the 1960s, many of them shaped by the civil rights and new left movements of the decade

---this generation will demand equal treatment in employment and education, and call for a fundamental rethinking of gender roles in matters of sexuality, childcare and housework

Stonewall Riot: 1969 uprising in which the patrons of a gay bar in New York City fight back against police harassment marks the beginning of the Gay Rights movement

All of these movements will inspire sustained, and sometime violent reaction from more conservative elements of American society, and all will arguably find their continued progress frustrated in the Reagan 'eighties, but it is not an exaggeration to collectively identify their effect as a profound social revolution

-all these trends will have profound cultural and literary consequences, as women and American minorities explore and construct their identities through literature

Immigration

---after a many-decade lull in immigration stemming from anti-immigration legislation and the effects of the great depression, immigration act of 1965 again enables large stream of immigrants to enter America

-the difference this time is that large numbers of third world residents, especially from Asia, will be admitted on the basis of the desirability of their professions; we'll meet some of these individuals or their descendants in the last few readings of the course

## **V. Cultural Trends**

---New York remains the cultural capital of America, and modernism becomes institutionalized as the official high culture of the elite  
---sleek, streamlined designs of modernist architecture becomes the favored option for American corporate office buildings  
---Picasso and the Abstract Expressionists become dominant paradigm in modern painting  
---the highly intellectualized, allusive free verse poetry of T. S. Eliot becomes the favored model for postwar American poetry

Key challenge to this modernist hegemony is the loose movement centered first in New York and later San Francisco known as Beat (Kerouac, Burroughs, Ginsberg)

-movement in many ways harks back to the tenets of American Romanticism in its pursuit of cosmic consciousness, radical individualism, and a rejection of American materialism  
-Beats are interested in Eastern religion, drugs and non-monogamous sexuality as means of transcendence

Beat Movement is sometimes identified as part of a larger movement that can be seen as both a reaction and continuation of modernism known as post-modernism

Like Modernism, the meaning of postmodernism is by no means agreed upon

In many ways postmodernism appears to represent a repetition and intensification of the themes of modernism.

---chaotic, fragmented world in which epistemological certainty appears elusive if not downright chimerical; postmodern works tend to feature an even greater skepticism toward mainstream religious and political systems of belief

---a very self-conscious approach to the making of art, which often includes self-reflexive moments

---simultaneous fascination with, and repulsion toward, popular or mass cultural forms (eg. television)

---emphasis on complexity, ambiguity, undecidability and irony

---a self-conscious eclecticism that mixes and juxtaposes elements of high and low culture, or parodically confronts the present with the past ("learning from Las Vegas")

If one is looking for a way to distinguish the two movements from one another, one might start by suggesting a significant difference in attitude rather than theme. Modernism tends to strike an angry, despairing or plaintive stance toward the empty world devoid of meaning that it represents. Postmodernism, on the other hand, is often read as turning a resigned eye, or even celebrating the chaos and disintegration it chronicles.